



Spiritist Mediumship as Historical Mediation: African-American Pasts, Black Ancestral Presence, and Afro-Cuban Religions

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Abstract

The scholarship on Afro-Atlantic religions has tended to downplay the importance of Kardecist *Espiritismo*. In this article I explore the performance of Spiritist rituals among Black North American practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions, and examine its vital role in the development of their religious subjectivity. Drawing on several years of ethnographic research in a Chicago-based Lucumí community, I argue that through Spiritist ceremonies, African-American participants engaged in memory work and other transformative modes of collective historiographical praxis. I contend that by inserting gospel songs, church hymns, and spirituals into the musical repertoire of *misas espirituales*, my interlocutors introduced a new group of beings into an existing category of ethnically differentiated 'spirit guides'. Whether embodied in ritual contexts or cultivated privately through household altars, these spirits not only personify the ancestral dead; I demonstrate that they also mediate between African-American historical experience and the contemporary practice of Yorùbá- and Kongo-inspired religions.

Keywords

African Diaspora, Black North American religion, historiography, Santería, *Espiritismo*, spirit possession

Pirates of the Afro-Caribbean World

Among practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions such as Palo Monte and Lucumí, popularly called Santería, Spiritist ceremonies are frequently celebrated. This has been the case wherever these traditions' distinct yet interrelated classes of spirits—including Kongo *mpungus* and Yorùbá *orishas*—have gained a foothold, particularly in global urban centers. Black North Americans have proven similar to their Latino/a and white co-religionists in this respect; as their involvement in Afro-Atlantic traditions has increased over the last quarter century so too has their attendance at the Kardecist rituals termed *misas*

espirituales, 'spiritual Masses'. Just as African-Americans have emulated their Afro-Cuban forebears in performing the cowrie-shell divination called *dilogún*, using the private homes of religious leaders as temples and celebrating the orishas with sacred *batá* drums, they have also participated in *misas* to cultivate relationships with the cosmopolitan entities termed 'spirit guides', some of whom are thought to be 'elevated' ancestors. Black North Americans have adopted the belief that the identities of spirit guides emerge mainly in the context of *misas* when they offer up names, anecdotes, and other biographical information to participants in response to the ritualized behavior of those for whom they wish to act as helpmeets.

One such community is Ilé Laroye, a predominantly Black North American house of Espiritismo and orisha worship based in Chicago. For almost twenty-five years, the head of this community has been Nilaja Campbell, a renowned African-American orisha praise singer, cowrie-shell diviner, and elder in Palo Monte. Nilaja was initiated into Lucumí in 1986 by a Cuban-born ritual sponsor as a child of Eleguá, deity of communications, master of crossroads, and messenger of the gods. In her capacity as an *iyalocha*, or 'mother of the orishas', Nilaja had initiated almost thirty protégés, or 'godchildren', as Lucumí priests at the time of this writing. She was also an established Spiritist medium, accustomed to leading both newcomers and seasoned adepts in the conduct of *misas espirituales*, also called *misas blancas* or; 'white masses'. Familiar characteristics of Nilaja's *misas* include encouragement to obtain the ritual sacra of orishas viewed by elders as essential for religious progress; advice regarding social relations outside the immediate community; a type of spirit possession referred to as 'passing' rather than 'mounting', the latter term reserved for mystical seizure by orishas and mpungus; and the sharing of seemingly arbitrary images that, if corroborated, have the potential to convey a message. Another regular feature of the *misas* at Ilé Laroye is the singing of spirituals, gospel tunes, and church hymns with deep roots in African-American religious history, alongside Cuban and Puerto Rican songs that allude to Spiritist themes and incorporate imagery derived from Palo Monte.

The following excerpt from my fieldnotes furnishes a glimpse into one *misa* in Nilaja's home:

'Tunde was on the couch with Imani and her son Micah, getting ready to watch *Pirates of the Caribbean*. I could hear Nilaja in the shrine room doing a sixteen-cowries reading for a client; Rashida sent me to fetch candles, then glasses. Ebony and her brother ate barbecue while we chatted . . . The *misa* started with Arlene reading, as usual. Nilaja focused some attention on Imani, saying she needed to receive the set of fierce orishas called 'Warriors'. When Nilaja was singing, Rashida saw a priest with a square cap—of the *pileus quadratus* type, I imagine—leading a procession. Ebony then started rubbing her own mouth and the top of her head with her right hand, over and over

again; she swayed to and fro, vibrating on her feet. In this state, eyes clenched closed, she 'cleansed' Nilaja, Arlene and Theo, but regained her composure by the time she reached me. There was much singing of spirituals, including 'I'll Fly Away', 'Wade in the Water', and to the rhythm of Arlene's tambourine:

*Jesus is real to me
Yes, Jesus is real to me
Though others may doubt him
I can't live without Him
For Jesus is real to me*

Billal seemed to be 'passing' a spirit—maybe the slave identified as his guardian—and dispensed advice in a gravelly voice with a pointed finger. 'Sing!' he rasped, stooped over, clapping slowly.¹

What I have described was not out of the ordinary. It was an average Saturday night, when one might catch a Hollywood movie exploding with special effects while eating some disappointingly dry fast food. Attending such misas formed part of the quotidian experience of belonging in Ilé Laroye.

It may be difficult to comprehend how one community could accommodate ceremonies redolent with Yorùbá and Kongo symbolism alongside others in which participants proclaimed, 'Jesus is real to me'. Spiritist misas and Lucumí rites in particular seem to have so many cosmological differences as to preclude inclusion within the same ritual system, let alone performance by the same group of practitioners. In what follows, however, I focus on misas as a site wherein practitioners actively construct their commitment to Afro-Cuban traditions. This is a novel approach because *Espiritismo* has remained peripheral in the literature on Afro-Atlantic religions, in part because it seems to offer little evidence of cultural 'retentions' or 'survivals', and scholarship on the Caribbean more generally has tended to be preoccupied with confirming the 'authentic' Africinity of Black practices (Scott 1991; Romberg 2003, 54). I depart from this research paradigm by arguing that Spiritist 'ritualization' is nothing less than central to the operation of the modern Lucumí house, or *ilé*, because it simultaneously distances participants ideologically from their religious upbringings, while recognizing their continuing affective importance (Bell 1992). A corollary to this thesis is that the efficacy of Spiritist techniques—such as singing hymns not as a statement of faith, but as a tactic for accessing the Christian dead—rests largely on the force of misas' moral-ethical critique concerning the collective and personal pasts of practitioners. I assert that this critique is deployed through embodied practices that are most profitably understood as historiographical.

Recent studies of Afro-Atlantic religions have documented practitioners' ingenuity in pilfering from competing sociocultural-aesthetic regimes and

appropriating hegemonic discursive strategies, imagery, and elite iconographic forms. Raquel Romberg (2005) has coined the phrase 'ritual piracy' to denote such 'creolization with an attitude', thus underscoring relations of power and authority in the study of social processes. One might be tempted to hazard an analogy between Black North Americans' use of Spiritist ceremonies and the 'pirating' of media artifacts—films, music, video games, and so forth—released into unforeseen channels of circulation. Bearing in mind Romberg's stress on the alchemical and transformative effects of mimetic 'poaching', however, I intend to pursue my primary argument that misas appeal to my interlocutors as vehicles for the conversion of collectively aggregated African-American pasts into a communal Black ancestral presence (de Certeau 1984). This challenge to prevalent models of religion-as-resistance stands to benefit scholars of both continental African and Diasporic religions by refusing to locate ritual performances along a spectrum of greater or lesser liberatory potential (Asad 2003), and instead, identifying a suite of historiographical practices that generate a distinctive mode of Afro-Atlantic religious subjectivity. The memory work pioneered by such 'pirates' of the Afro-Caribbean world reconstitutes their 'Blackness' within the sociocultural framework of a global African Diaspora, and thus merits close examination by researchers concerned with apprehending the mediating impact of local ritual repertoires on transnational religious formations.

Spiritism in the Afro-Atlantic Context

During the Cuban colonial period, cane cultivation demanded the unprecedented movement of accumulated capital and unfree labor from Europe, Africa, and Asia. Most slaves arrived in Cuba between 1764 and 1868 (Curtin 1969; Castellanos and Castellanos 1987); it is generally held that slaves from Central Africa were the first, and their healing rites laid the foundation for Palo Monte as well as a larger complex of Kongo-inspired initiatory traditions developed in eastern Cuba and collectively termed *reglas de congo*, as opposed to *regla ocha*, a synonym for Lucumí. During the middle third of the nineteenth century, more slaves arrived from West Africa, many among them from linguistically related groups later to be called Yorùbá. The Yorùbá carried with them the memory of festivals and calendrical rites, verses of different oracular forms including those of the *Ifá* and sixteen-cowries systems, and a familiarity with 'cross-cutting' institutions whose membership was determined not by ethnic affiliation or descent but initiation (Palmié 1993, 346). They also rendered tribute to a category of spirits called *òrìsà* (orisha), envisioned as the

patrons and parental protectors of devotees. By the mid-twentieth century, the worship of these deities would be termed *Santería*. While representational modes and hermeneutical traditions indigenous to West and Central Africa informed slaves' reception of unfamiliar narrative and material objects (Apter 1991), a small group of Lucumí visionaries were intent on regulating divergent practices in the interest of preserving an elevated level of religious competence and expertise among initiates (Brown 2003). To them and their racially and ethnically diverse protégés are owed the modern ritual protocols of *regal ocha*.

The first instances of Spiritist practice in its modern form are to be found neither in Africa nor in the Caribbean, but in the United States. In 1848 a pair of young sisters from upstate New York, Margaret and Kate Fox, professed to hear rapping sounds made by a murdered peddler said to be interred in the family basement. Word of their ability to interpret these spirit's noises spread throughout the surrounding "burned-over district," previously set aflame by the evangelical revivalism of the Second Great Awakening, the resulting "Methodist explosion," and the genesis of new religious communities, including Mormons, all in close geographical proximity. The Fox sisters' repeated demonstrations of communication with other spirits made believers out of many prominent abolitionists, freethinkers, and Quaker reformers (Braude 1989). Yet they were merely the most famous in a long line of Anglo-Americans claiming to enjoy intercourse with heavenly spirits, probably starting with the Shakers (Emmons 2003, 59). At this time participatory mediumistic genres such as séances ignited the imagination of thousands throughout the United States, prompting the formation of regular gatherings, the foundation of publishing houses, and the composition of innumerable tracts, along with at least two Spiritist hymnals (Warden 2006). In the Midwest 'American Spiritualism' caught fire with the same kindling, no less than in the Northeast and South, and had a hand in shaping religious movements such as the Black Spiritual Church (Wehmeyer 2008).

Although American-style Spiritualist practice inspired many a nineteenth-century European observer, 'Spiritism' in Latin America and the Caribbean generally refers to the teachings of nineteenth-century French polymath Allan Kardec, born Hippolyte Léon Dénizard Rivail in 1804. Kardec conducted systematic investigations into the 'table turning' phenomenon sweeping Europe at the time. In the drawing rooms of the bourgeoisie, he witnessed many curious occurrences and decided to experiment using two young women as mediums in 1850. He would later write that his 'conversation with invisible intelligences' had 'completely revolutionized' his notions about the spiritual realm, so much so that he changed his name to that of an ancient Gallic Druid

that he believed he had been in a previous life (cited in Kardec 1989 [1898], 12). He wrote a series of texts explaining how to communicate with the invisible world, especially in order to contact dead relatives. Kardec's *Spirits' Book* (1857), *Book of Mediums* (1861), and *The Gospel According to Spiritism* (1864) became sensations in Latin America and Caribbean, thus codifying the tenets of Spiritism; in all, he wrote seven volumes that insisted on calling Spiritism a 'science'.² This was not simply a device to legitimate its practice. In Kardec's time, new technologies such as the telegraph and chemical photography appeared to hold out the promise of not only capturing the presence of invisible energies, but also piercing the membrane between the realms of the human and divine. Spiritists drew inspiration from the scientific method as a means of yielding knowledge through experiments, and extended their understanding of Darwin's theory of evolution into the realm of the supernatural.

Translated and reprinted countless times, Kardec's texts became manuals for Spiritist séances and other rituals referred to as *mesas blancas*, white tables, or *misas blancas*, an analogy to the paradigmatic Roman Catholic ceremony also organized around a table draped in cloth.³ In Puerto Rico, the preexisting Taíno belief in spirits and the possibility of communication with them through religious ritual may partly account for the warm reception that Kardec's writings received. With its emphasis on apocryphal and canonized saints as mediators, the folk Catholicism of the lower classes combined with the desire among elites for a Swedenborgian vision of cosmic order to swell the ranks of Spiritist centers (Carroll 1997). Kardecist Spiritists taught that after leaving the physical body, souls would experience successive stages of purification that would continue through many cycles of reincarnation, attaining greater 'light' and 'evolution' by contributing to the spiritual development of the living. As Bret E. Carroll writes,

The Spiritualist emphasis on gradual spiritual growth was part of a 'kinetic revolution' in nineteenth-century Western culture and thought in which the world was conceived in developmental terms and motion became increasingly accentuated at the expense of stasis. Conceptions of the next world as well as this one were affected by this trend; heaven became less a place of static bliss and more a place of activity and progressive improvement.⁴ (1997, 62-63)

Despite these Spiritists' insistence on the stability of the spirit world, the principle of vertical mobility obtained. They sought to contact those spirits with the greatest 'progress' in order to reap the benefit of their experience, thus confirming their own attitudes concerning social organization, intersubjective relationships, bodily constitution, and proper courses of moral-ethical action.

In Puerto Rico as in Cuba, Catholic worship was largely anticlerical, not only in the sense that devotees felt they could do without formally educated and ordained priests as conduits to the divine. Embraced by elites as well as the lower classes, Spiritism was thought to be compatible with anticonservative, proindependence, and liberal sentiment, promising interaction with the dead and visions of the afterlife perceived to be without scriptural or doctrinal basis. By offering technologies for the re-creation of the past in communal settings, Spiritist practices contributed to the emergence of 'countermemories' that went against the grand narratives of religious and secular colonial authorities. For instance, Spiritist practice emphasized tolerance for other traditions deemed heretical by the Church and, contrary to ecclesiastical teaching, implied that heaven was within reach for 'heathens' such as Native Americans and Muslims (Torres Rivera 2005). The ideals of the Enlightenment, such as the notion of universal laws and ethical precepts regulating virtue, profoundly affected Spiritist ritual protocols and religious discourse. It was no coincidence that Spiritism arose alongside other democratizing liturgical forms that ensured the ability of all participants to have a voice in religious proceedings (Román 2007b). Spiritist leaders were, by and large, anticonformist with idiosyncratic tendencies; while charismatic, they tended not to encourage the investiture of authority in a single person or to concentrate power within their respective circles.

It has become commonplace to cast the emergence of Spiritist practices in early Lucumí communities as a means of dealing with the dead for those of Yorùbá descent, in the absence of practitioners well versed in funerary masquerades and ancestor cults such as that of the Egúngún (Canizares 1993; Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert 2003). While this type of post-hoc rationalization is familiar to students of Afro-Atlantic religions—one need only recall the argument made for Roman Catholic images as a form of 'disguise' for the orishas—it is inadequate for accounting for the popularity of misas blancas among the many Lucumí initiates of European, Asian, and African yet non-Yorùbá descent. Moreover, it has not been established that all precolonial Yorùbá groups dealt with death through Egúngún. Indeed, a plethora of proto-Spiritist practices preceded both Kardec and Lucumí in eastern Cuba, and gave rise to hybrid non-institutionalized varieties such as *Espiritismo cruzado* and *Muertera bembé de sao* (Dodson 2008). Spiritist forms more heavily indebted to Kardecist thought such as *Espiritismo de mesa* (Spiritism of the table) and *de cordón* (of the cord) also seem to have become established first in rural Cuba, and traveled to Havana in the early twentieth century (Román 2007a). The main factors contributing to their acceptance appear to have been Kardec's endorsement of women as mediums with abilities equal to those of men; the widespread interest in communicating with the dead in the

aftermath of the Ten Years' War (1868-1878), a conflict that resulted in massive civilian casualties as well as the brutal forced resettlement of local populations; and the ability of Spiritism to provide an ideological bridge between folk Catholicism and African-inspired initiatory traditions (Bermúdez 1967).

It is possible to find contemporary orisha-worshipping communities in which Kardecist rites are not performed and only spirits of the Yorùbá-derived pantheon are honored. In fact, in communities associated with the Black Òyótúnjí Village, misas are emblematic of the creole Cuban approach to religious practice reviled as anathema by 'Yorùbá reversionist' groups intent on 'purifying' orisha worship of colonial European representations, in both the semiotic and 'collective,' Durkheimian sense of the term (Clarke 2004). For members of the American Yorùbá Movement, the Kardecist Spiritist use of statuary, Roman Catholic prayers, and crosses symbolize the 'confusion' of religious modes thought to have whitened, and therefore degraded, the 'legitimate' African contribution to Afro-Cuban traditions, symbolized by the consecrated stones thought to embody the orishas (Palmié 1995). Yet not only Black orisha priests have objected to misas. Miguel 'Willie' Ramos, Nilaja's Cuban-born mentor, has refused to hold them because they do not conform to Yorùbá precedent. Ramos deems them 'inauthentic', locating his criteria for authenticity in the historically verifiable practices of the slaves and first-generation Africans whose innovations came to govern Lucumí tradition (personal communication). It may seem ironic that Ramos, considered to be phenotypically if not socially white, appears to be more greatly invested in notions of Africanity than Nilaja is, but for a short while after her initiation she too stopped holding misas.⁵ According to Nilaja, spirit guides then began to 'come through' to address her godchildren during the postinitiatory divination called *itá*, clamoring for recognition. Deferring to them beforehand became a means of ensuring that they would allow initiations to proceed without interference.

Recent studies have suggested misas' debt to Central African religious modes, asserting that some of the elements most frequently dismissed as 'whitening'—the presence of a cross in a glass of water on the white table, for example—are in fact Kongo in origin, and were preserved by Bantu-speaking slaves and their descendants long before the crystallization of the Lucumí tradition (see Moreno Vega 1999). While this rationale has the benefit of accounting for the presence of Congo spirits as guides, it merely substitutes one myth of origin for another, leaving unchallenged the notion that Black authenticity must be located in a territorialized African past. This Africanizing discourse has vital currency among practitioners; for example, if challenged concerning the perceived absence of an African basis for these practices, Nilaja mobilizes

her command of Yorùbá cosmology to cite the category of *iwin* (lost souls, specters, or sprites), beings distinct from the ancestors or orishas in that they are not tied to particular ancestral lineages, thus implying that *iwin* and spirit guides are versions of the same phenomena. But the value of misas for members of Ilé Laroye did not derive from their ability to connect them to a specific racial or ethnic identity. Instead, misas affirmed participants' emergence from a dense matrix of relationships and histories that stretched over centuries and continents beyond their individual births, yet in which they were still profoundly implicated. Misas were seen to deliver access to forms of knowledge impossible to obtain otherwise and, regardless of their Afro-Atlantic beginnings, to *work*.

Black Music at the White Table

The traveler's past changes according to the route he has followed: not the immediate past, that is, to which each day that goes by adds a day, but the more remote past. Arriving at each new city, the traveler finds again a past of his that he did not know he had; the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places.

—Italo Calvino⁶

Nilaja learned how to conduct misas from a Puerto Rican mentor during the time of her introduction to Lucumí in the early 1980s.⁷ She has hosted them almost as long as she has been initiated. Although several different forms of this ritual practice exist throughout the Americas, Nilaja started out attending what are frequently called *veladas*, or evening vigils. Held as a complement to Lucumí practice in Chicago rather than as a separate religious modality, these meetings lasted long into the night—sometimes until two in the morning—because the mediums did not want to conclude the ritual until everyone present had received a message from the spirits. Although participants attended such ceremonies with particular problems and questions in mind, the stated objective for Spiritist gatherings has consistently been *desarrollo espiritual*: the spiritual development or evolution necessary for reaching a higher level of awareness of the spirits' desires, and to foster the virtue required in order to meet them, thereby fulfilling one's earthly purpose. In her own misas, Nilaja has focused on communicating with spirit guides. During the period of my ethnographic research in Ilé Laroye, between 2005 and 2009, some ancestors were thought to convey their wishes to descendants during misas, but ancestors as a group were termed *egún* and propitiated in different ceremonies of a

pronounced orisha-centered character. These included chanting in the Lucumí liturgical language, displays of Afro-Cuban food in multiples of nine (indexing the orisha Oyá's relationship with the dead), and the performance of sacrificial offerings.

I began attending misas at Nilaja's home in 2003, some small—only five or six people huddled in the living room—and others so large that two rows of stools and banquettes would be occupied behind the main circle of a dozen practitioners. In most cases, the preparations for the misa began about an hour beforehand, with a rectangular table either set up in the front room of the basement or brought up to the living room. A white cloth was smoothed onto the surface of the table, and one large goblet filled with cool water placed on it; a metal cross was then put in the goblet. Six other glasses of water were arranged around this one, and as more people began to arrive the table was set with a large vase to accommodate the white or light-colored flowers participants had been instructed to bring with them: calla lilies, roses, daisies, baby's breath. Other vases were set on the floor with mop-shaped flowers, such as carnations and chrysanthemums, most often used for cleansings during misas.⁸ Propped up on the table behind the glasses were a plaster statue of a cross-legged Plains Indian with braided hair and a feathered headdress, a brown-faced rag doll with enormous felt eyes, and a turbaned 'gypsy' figurine. A multicolored bundle of bandannas tied together was placed next to the row of cigars on the left side of the table, close to Nilaja. Someone was chosen to cut a slice from an aromatic, resinous slab of incense, light a button of charcoal on the stove, combine the two in a brass burner, and fumigate the entrances and corners. A white candle was always left at the front door in a dish to burn for the duration of the ritual.

Most misas lasted between one and a half to two hours because most participants were novices, unprepared to bear what Nilaja called 'the agony of nothingness' and seemingly endless silences of lengthy *veladas*.⁹ The misas blancas held in Ilé Laroye resembled the activity documented in Cuban and Puerto Rican Spiritist centers and private homes to which participants have gone to *desarrollar facultades* (develop spiritual faculties) and increase their ability to 'pass' spirit guides, or temporarily incorporate them, for over a century. Ilé Laroye did not follow the model observed in Santiago de Cuba or in other Lucumí communities in Chicago wherein orishas also come forward to mount mediums during misas (Diantaill 2002). In fact, before attending misas Nilaja's godchildren carefully removed their *elekes*, the consecrated necklaces thought to materialize the presence of the orishas. Nilaja would explain that this was necessary because the ritual was not primarily for them, and the presence of such paraphernalia might invite the orishas into the gathering or,

conversely, inhibit the activity of spirit guides. While the two entities were rigorously separated as a matter of orthopraxis according to the conventions of Nilaja's religious lineage, the orishas were discursively constructed alongside spirit guides in misas. It was not simply that songs occasionally mentioned orishas, such as 'Tanto Como Yo Camino', whose lyrics build on the correspondence between the orisha Babalú Ayé and Saint Lazarus.¹⁰ More importantly, these ceremonies oriented newcomers to the differences and connections between orishas and spirit guides as drawn by the elders, and furnished entrées into the ritual hierarchy and corporeal disciplines of orisha worship.

Although influenced by several different styles of Spiritist practice, Nilaja defined her own as *Espiritismo de mesa*, aligned with the 'scientific Spiritism' of Allan Kardec. Until quite recently, the house used an exceedingly literal translation of Kardec's *Collection of Selected Prayers* (1975) in which grammatical articles were rendered to precede proper nouns in English ('the Peace', 'the Light'), and throughout which false cognates were strewn. None found the copy risible, however; the impenetrability of some of the language only served to heighten the sense that the text was exalted speech. The reader, usually Arlene Stevens, would recite excerpts in a predetermined order and cadence, pausing periodically to allow participants to pray the Our Father and Hail Mary at regular intervals, prompted by Nilaja.¹¹ Cast as universally identifiable versions of the more historically particular spirit guides that participants attempt to contact during misas, the personifications of Peace, Hope, and Charity delivered poetic monologues one after another, limning the roles they play for humanity. They each highlighted the importance of Spiritist practices in ensuring that they continue to have a voice in the modern world, and described Spiritism as nothing less than globally salvific. Other prayers sent unevolved spirits away, and warned them not to disrupt the proceedings. Yet other petitions with a more pronounced Roman Catholic influence exhorted them to cultivate virtues such as patience and humility, delineating the relationship between these qualities and the acquisition of 'higher' spiritual gifts, such as clairvoyance. Then the songs would begin.

Nilaja had learned some Spiritist songs when she first started to attend misas; others she committed to memory over the years with the aid of recordings, such as tapes and compact discs, most of which did not carry translations or transcribed lyrics. She always set the first song in motion, praising *el Santísimo*—'the Holy of Holies', understood to be the Eucharistic host in a Catholic devotional context but referring to the white table itself or most enlightened spirits in a misa—and requesting succor and protection from the Cuban Virgin of Charity, associated with Oshún.¹² Nilaja would call out, 'Sea Santísimo!' and the chorus of the assembled would answer, 'Sea!'

*Sea [el] Santísimo,
Sea!
Madre mía de la Caridad!
Ayúdanos, ampáranos
En el nombre de Dios...
¡Ay Dios!
(repeat)*

*Long live the Most Holy [Sacrament]!
So be it!
Mother Mary, [Virgin] of Charity!
Help us, shelter us,
In the name of God...
Oh God!*

A number of other songs similarly appropriated Christian personages and concepts, redescribing them in Spiritist terms. The song that was usually next summarized the life of Jesus in a few lines, narrating the Holy Ghost's arrival on earth after Christ's ascension as the return of an evolved Spirit from heaven, one who now comes *regando flores*, a phrase that can mean both watering flowers and scattering their petals. This image can be understood as referring simultaneously to cleansing a person's body with flowers during a *misa* and contributing to the growth of Spiritism more generally, thus putting its success, quite literally, in 'God's hands'.

Most songs contain images of travel over vast distances and wandering on foot in search of knowledge, metaphors for the journey between planes of existence the spirits were asked to undertake during the course of a *misa*.¹³ Other lyrics directly calling spirits 'with a love of the earth' to enter the gathering include the following:

*Si la luz redentora te llama, buen ser,
y te llama con amor a la tierra,
yo quisiera ver a ese ser
cantándole la gloria
al divino Manuel.
Oye buen ser,
avanza y ven,
que el coro te llama
y dice ven.*

*If the redeeming light calls you, good being,
and it calls you with love for/to the earth,
I would like to see that being,
singing to the glory
Of the divine [St. or spirit] Manuel.
Listen, good being,
hurry and come,
for the chorus is calling you
and telling you to come.¹⁴*

Another song not only referred to the spirits as 'protectors' and 'spirit guides in our mission', but also invited them to be part of a 'coronation'. In the context of a *Lucumí* house, a Spiritist coronation entails the ritual 'crowning' of an initiate-to-be with their main spirit guide prior to ordination into the priesthood. Coronation occurs during a *misa* and involves an elder placing a bowl of water on the soon-to-be-initiated person's head. As indicated earlier, a 'spiritual coronation' is viewed as necessary in order to appease the spirit guides and elevated ancestors of a priest, lest they 'hurry and come' to possess this person during crucial moments in the initiatory rite or otherwise interfere in her future relationship with the orishas.

Misas in Ilé Laroye never failed to contain songs whose provenance—such as those with the lines ‘*Awiri wiri wiri/ awiri wiri ko*’ and ‘*Kimbini waa waa waa/ kimbini waa/ me kobayende*’—was defined not by their words, but by the faster or more irregular rhythms in which they were sung; Kongo (Warden 2006).¹⁵ Most of the elders had been ‘scratched’ into the Afro-Cuban tradition Palo Monte prior to their ordinations into Lucumí, and regarded souls of the dead either born in Central Africa or initiated into Palo during their lifetimes as particularly formidable spirit guides.¹⁶ A number of Palo songs, called *mambos*, refer to the tradition’s Bantu-inspired paraphernalia and practices: the consecrated object called a *nganga*; the ceremonial writing of signatures, or *firmas*; and the hint of *puyas*, or ritualized insults, that push Kongo spirits to appear and prove that they exist. The lyrics to one of the songs repeated the phrase ‘Salaam malekum, malekum salaam’, the Arabic greeting still used by Palo initiates today; another set to music the iconic Palo phrase, ‘Why do you call me, if you don’t know me?’ (*¿Por qué tu me llamas, si tu no me conoces?*). Among those that named Palo deities, or *mpungus*, were ‘Siete Rayos en la palma’, ‘Lucero ‘ta ‘lumbrando’, and ‘Chola dingue’. *Mambos* conformed to the ethos of the Palo tradition as a whole, vouching for the potency of Kongo medicines and the virtuous competence of adepts, even after death.¹⁷ In one of the most poignant *mambos* regularly sung in Ilé Laroye, a ‘Congo from Guinea’ says, ‘I left my soil behind/I have come to practice charity’ (*Yo dejo mi tierra allá/ Yo vengo a hacer caridad*). Sometimes the group sang ‘my bones’ (*mis huesos*) instead of ‘my earth’; both terms are equally plausible as synecdoches for the land of the dead, or for Africa.

Other lyrics bear candid witness to lifetimes of crushing travail and the desperate need for relief, healing, and cleansing. These songs may be understood as products of the Cuban and Puerto Rican histories from which they emerged, rich in the experience of women, persons of African descent, and those from the lower classes, excluded from official histories yet still resonant today (Routon 2008). Yet what the songs meant to the members of Ilé Laroye cannot be ascertained primarily by parsing their words. Indeed, few participants in the misas were aware of their exact denotative meaning. As when singing Lucumí praises to the orishas, only a few ritual specialists were familiar with the definitions of the terms used, and how different sounds fit together semantically; usually only Latino participants in misas—mainly Nilaja’s Mexican and Guatemalan godchildren—understood the lyrics, at least literally. Not even elders would say with complete confidence that they always grasped the significance of the lyrics they sang.¹⁸ Some participants guessed at the meanings of the lyrics based on true and false cognates, or misheard the boundaries between words and turned clauses into mondegreens: words

invested with meaning based on their sounds (Wright 1954). The communal meals and refreshments shared after misas gave participants an opportunity to express their desire to learn the import of specific songs, particularly those that appeared to change the tone or mood of the ritual, and question Nilaja, Arlene, Theo, Rashida, Genevieve, and other elders on the best techniques for memorization, in view of their obscurity. The songs were pedagogical tools, but not in the sense that they submitted tenets for belief at the moment of their performance.

The first scholar to conduct a systematic study of Spiritist music in Cuba, Axel Hesse, investigated the songs referred to as *plegarias*.¹⁹ According to Nolan Warden, Hesse listed five main reasons for their recitation: '1) to give the spiritual session a certain ambiance; 2) to invoke, greet, or bid farewell to the spirits; 3) to make communication possible between mediums and spirits or spirits and Saints; 4) to prepare water for purification; and 5) to characterize a spirit culturally' (1975, 67-91). It is noteworthy that none of the motives assigned to the singing of *plegarias* by Hesse requires that participants understand the words. In fact, in Ilé Laroye's misas Spanish appeared to perform a function analogous to Lucumí in orisha-focused settings: it was a liturgical language, no less sacred for being modern and living. As Anthony D. Buckley writes of the incantatory language used among the continental Africa Yorùbá, *orijinle* (deep speech), patients cannot possibly 'benefit psychologically from the content of the incantation because it is virtually inaudible' (1997, 146); even when a patient can puzzle out incantatory words one by one, it will nevertheless not be clear how they combine with the application of medicines to garner a result. Similarly, in misas only seasoned mediums catch the allusions made to obscure concepts and know the archaic meanings of common words. The combination of their songs and accompanying gestures was perceived to cause the desired effects enumerated above, despite any confusion about the lyrics.

I would add a sixth purpose for the singing of *plegarias*, *mambos*, and other songs in misas: to develop an interpretive framework able to reconcile participants' religious pasts with their present commitments by allowing previous personal and familial religious identities to be approached with appreciation, as well as with irony and critical appraisal.²⁰ In Ilé Laroye about a quarter of the songs heard in misas came from the African-American religious experience.²¹ Singing *mambos* tended to 'heat up' a misa, warming participants' bodies and accelerating the 'passing' of spirit guides. Almost without exception, spirituals and gospel songs followed those for Palo spirits, and they appeared to maintain a misa's temperature once it had risen to a boil. Many of the participants remembered these songs from childhood, and threw the force

of their recollections behind the performance of them, clapping, humming, harmonizing, and using their feet, walls, and the sides of benches as percussion instruments. In the case of many plegarias and mambos, the elders began them, and would need to repeat a verse at least once before others piped in with full-throated assurance that they could utter the correct sounds in the right order. By contrast, uninitiated members of the ilé often beat elders to the punch in commencing a capella versions of the same verses they remembered from church. The unanimity of the participation in gospel songs and spirituals was such that after one ended, sighs, whispers of satisfaction, and approving comments would trail after it like an auditory plume of smoke, along with reports that singers had seen figures dancing or intuited the presence of ancestors.

While such practices may appear to fall under the rubric of syncretism, initiates were quite adamant that Christian belief as such did not enter into their worship in Spiritist, Palo, and Lucumí contexts. For instance, after Nilaja's eldest grandchild, Theo, toasted someone with champagne after the successful conclusion of an Ori ritual, I teasingly chided him, saying that his breath shouldn't smell of liquor in a sacred place.²² Arlene overheard me and answered for him: 'Ain't no Christians up in here. *Jesus ain't on no cross!*'²³ Her comment rendered explicit the sense of liberation from Christian mores that elders felt as a result of their conversion to Lucumí, and their changed attitude toward the nature of the divine. Their singing of hymns in misas was not intended as a performative declaration of Christian faith, so much as a complex acknowledgement of their churchly pasts.²⁴ Three of the spirituals most frequently sung in misas, 'This Little Light of Mine', 'I'll Fly Away', and 'Since I Laid My Burden Down', articulate the pleasure thought to be derived from being called—indeed, interpellated—then accepting the vocation, and leading radically different lives as a result of their ongoing religious transformation:

*Hush, hush
Somebody's callin' my name
Hush, now hush (Now hush!)
Somebody's callin' my name
Oh my Lord, oh my Lord, what shall I do?*

*Sounds like Jesus
Somebody's callin' my name
Sounds like Jesus
And somebody's callin' my name
Oh my lord, Oh my lord, what shall I do?
I'm so glad that trouble don't last always*

*I'm so glad that trouble don't last always
I'm so glad I'm glad that trouble don't last always
Oh my lord, Oh my lord, what shall I do?*

*Well you know, I'm so glad
I know that trouble don't last always
Oh My Lord, oh my lord, what shall I do?*

*I'm so glad, I got my religion in time,
I'm so glad, so glad, I got my religion in time,*

Lord in time, Lord, yes, in time, Lord, I got my religion in time

This stanza often turned effortlessly into the next song:

*Glory, glory, Hallelujah
Since I laid my burdens down
Feel like shouting, 'Hallelujah!'
Since I laid my burden down
Burdens down, Lord,
Burdens down, Lord,
Since I laid my burden down
Folks don't treat me
Like they used to
Since I laid my burdens down*

It requires no great stretch of the imagination to envision these lyrics as celebrating participants' transitions into and affiliations with Lucumí, when their previous religious commitments had, in many cases, become more burden and trouble than glory. Bearing in mind the tendency of Lucumí initiates to say that they sought initiation as a result of life-threatening illness and calamity, '*I'm so glad, I got my religion in time*' hints at one or more disasters averted.²⁵

These songs also provide temporary access to a world that participants could not imagine losing entirely. No matter how disinclined members of the *ilé* were to return to the Christian fold or how severe the degree of rupture with family traditions was, these songs expressed a desire to commemorate the remote and proximate pasts of family Bibles, Sunday meetings, and church suppers. Although the lyric 'folks don't treat me like they used to' implies that the singer had received better treatment after her conversion, it also brought to mind the inevitable deterioration of some relationships as a result of participation in Lucumí and Palo Monte. Moreover, as sung by the members of *Ilé Laroye*, the phrase '*Oh my Lord, what shall I do?*' admits some ambivalence felt in answering the 'call' of the *orishas* by getting initiated, conceded in many

a conversion narrative (Pérez 2010). In the Spiritist context songs such as these hold out the possibility of religious change without a wholesale repudiation of Christian forebears' decisions and lifeways. As if recognizing the distance of Spiritist practice from Lucumí's self-consciously Oyo-centric Yorùbá imaginary, African-American spirituals in misas assure Black practitioners that their ancestors have a place at the table. These songs integrate them into a more broadly Afro-Cuban style of practice by effectively turning African-Americans into one of the Diasporic *volk* thought to form a distinct *comisión*, or category, of spirit guides. For devotees concerned with validating their racial identities through religious practice, the presence of African-American songs in misas also turn Spiritismo into a viable vehicle for the expression of Blackness. Their lyrics are bridges to the past, as well as ladders to the spirit world.

Mediums teach that everyone carries an invisible *cuadro espiritual* or 'spiritual portrait', a complement of five to seven different spirit guides thought to impact the proclivities, conduct, and disposition of the person to whom they are attached.²⁶ The spirits within reach—I am tempted to say 'earshot'—of misas' participants have not only been those with African ancestry, such as Buffalo Soldiers.²⁷ They have been representatives of groups that loom large in the popular imagination, and are viewed as having been instrumental in the formation of the Afro-Atlantic world. In Ilé Laroye, church hymns such as 'Ave Maria' called Roman Catholic spirits, especially European clerics, while the spirits of First Peoples, equated with Central Africans throughout the Americas in what Robert Farris Thompson has called a 'feathered idiom of transcendence' (cited in Wehmeyer 2000, 63), rallied to the KiKongo lyrics of mambos. 'Gypsy' spirits emerged after the singing of Spanish plegarias; according to practitioner Steve Quintana, the *gitana* can be traced to the presence of Roma on the Iberian peninsula and in the New World:

The gitana... offers a connection to the Spaniards and Portuguese. There were in Cuba many people from Zaragoza and the south of France; therefore we had a lot of gitanos in Cuba... And as mediums, we feel the gitanos have a tremendous connection with the spirits... [I]n [colonial] times, gypsies worked with cards, the tarot cards, and they read your palms. You would give them a donation... and sometimes some of them were so dedicated to spiritual work that they would not charge any money. (cited in Wexler 2001, 92)

This selective description of Roma spirits as clairvoyant and altruistic neatly mirrors the self-understanding of many present-day Lucumí practitioners.

Indeed, while most spirit guides differed ethnically from the members of Ilé Laroye, crucial aspects of their biographies were presented as analogous to those of participants in misas. Among the spirit guides were men and women

dedicated to the worship of spirits during their lifetimes, able to heal with herbal remedies, and adept in the preparation of ritual objects. It has been argued that spirit guides are archetypes in the sense of mythic, universally recognized figures—the wise crone, the valiant warrior—yet this denies the specificity of the ritual contexts in which they crystallized, and their embodiment of historically contingent ‘subjugated experience’ and counter-memories that are seldom appreciated beyond the sociocultural milieus in which Spiritists have circulated (Foucault 1972, 81). Of this moral geography, Ysamur Flores-Peña writes,

The spirits in a Puerto Rican *séance*, or *velada*, appear in an order that reflects patterns of immigration to the island: Indians; Religious spirits or spirits related to Europe; Africans or Congos; Madamas and Madamos (related to but distinct from Congos); Arabs; Chinese; East Indians; [a]ll other spirits, including the Samaritan woman from the Bible and Gypsies. (2004, 97)

Although not all of these spirits turned up in Nilaja’s misas, the frequent visitors among them arrived in the same sequence, reflecting Caribbean rather than North American colonial history. For instance, Angela Jorge (1993) has traced the figure of the jet-complexioned ‘madama francesita’, renowned among the island’s Spiritists, to the historical presence of French freedmen and women from Martinique and Louisiana in Puerto Rico. Madamas also came to the aid of Ilé Laroyé’s members, along with *gitanas* and other spirits that revealed ilé elders’ negotiation of Spiritist ritual technologies in conversation with Latino mentors and texts (Euell 1997).

The spirits commonly seen, felt, and incorporated by mediums in Nilaja’s misas were addressed primarily according to Caribbean conventions, adopted in the course of participants’ implication in the Afro-Cuban ritual complex that encompasses Lucumí, Palo Monte, and Espiritismo de mesa (Polk 2009). Eoghan C. Ballard has written, ‘Generalized ancestral spirits [have kept] alive the ethnic identity of the populace with [their] names... and serve[d] in the absence of remembered genealogies the role that direct ancestors might’ (2005, 36 n.4). Yet participants made misas blancas their own, and answerable to their needs, through a variety of interpretive strategies. To comprehend the extent to which productive engagement with the Madama requires a reorientation and revision of everyday North American assumptions, one need only consider the common error made when turbaned Madama statuettes displayed in botánicas or practitioners’ homes are mistaken for images of ‘Aunt Jemima’, the advertising face of the commodified ‘mammy’ stereotype in the United States (Moore 2010). By lending the Madama some of the attributes associated

with the 'Big Momma' figure honored within Black communities, the members of Ilé Laroye made the Madama relevant to their experience despite her exotic provenance, and broadened her availability as a resource, especially for bodily healing.²⁸ The inclusion of African-American spirits as a *comisión* unto themselves was another way that the participants in Nilaja's misas transformed the white table of the misa into a platform for their everyday concerns: that the underemployed get good jobs, the displaced find adequate shelter, wayward youth mature into adults, and romantic partners return—or stay away.

Among the most urgent issues addressed by the presence of African-American spirits in misas was the reconfiguration of notions of descent to allow for the articulation of personal and corporate religious identity through ritual practice. Nilaja's husband 'Tunde once said, 'My mother didn't know who she *was*, past my grandmother'. For 'Tunde, to know one's lineage was to know oneself, one's history and culture; his words were a reflection on the paucity of genealogical information available to African-Americans relative to other groups in the United States due to the uprooting of families, not only by the slave trade but also the widespread movement—south to north and east to west—occasioned by the violence of Reconstruction, then by successive waves of the Great Migration. The pivotal role played by the figure of the ancestor in migration narratives has long been a subject of analysis among historians of African-American literature (Morrison 1984; Pouchet Paquet 1990; Wardi 2002), and the remembering of ancestors in misas may be viewed as a form of oral historiographical praxis that entailed the crafting of narrative and prompted the conducting of research. The members of Ilé Laroye begot their own generalized ancestral spirits by compiling alternative lineages arranged according to the perception of fellow feeling between ancestor and descendant rather than on the principle of generational succession. Participants tentatively reconstructed their bloodlines through both religious effort and data gathering; mediums regularly pressed participants to verify details about ancestors offered in misas by consulting with estranged family members, often in their dotage, to ascertain whether certain facial features, styles of dress, and behaviors seen in visions corresponded with family lore.

In collecting anecdotes and unearthing artifacts such as the heirlooms that mediums professed to see in visions, misa participants embraced a folk-historiography that recognized the effects of the social and geographical displacement their families had experienced (Wilson 1998). They held out the possibility of piecing together the disparate events and seemingly random details of their individual pasts into a coherent narrative, a story in which continuity and community triumphed over rupture and dislocation. Singing

African-American spirituals, hymns, and gospel tunes in misas similarly enhanced participants' sense of connection with the unnamed and forgotten majority of the dead that comprised their lineages. It also enhanced the promise of intimate relationship with a select few, those sufficiently 'elevated' to act as spirit guides. In addition, the manner in which these songs were used put Spiritism, Lucumí, and Palo Monte squarely within the context of Black North American religious history since participants' transformation into servants of the spirits was not framed as a departure from tradition, but as a recovery of it. The use of Black religious music in this fashion has other twentieth-century parallels; for instance, Victoria W. Wolcott documents that, among the followers of Noble Drew Ali, 'Although the mosque services did not have the emotionalism of Sanctified services, the Moorish Science Temple did use traditional African American hymns with new lyrics. Thus, "Give me that old-time religion" became "Moslem's that old-time religion"' (2001, 184). Such practices have striven to ensure that 'emergent traditions' would not be perceived as invented—made up out of whole cloth—but would be seen as rooted in the past, even while they 'signified on', or critiqued, aspects of the institution that had given rise to devotional songs themselves (Gates 1988).²⁹

Big Mommas and Buffalo Soldiers: Black North American Spirit Guides

Of course, the stated point of singing spirituals and other African-American hymns in misas was not to reconstruct participants' pasts but to facilitate the manifestation of the dead. In the words of Nilaja's godchild Samantha, 'Big Momma won't come unless we sing "Jesus is Real to Me"'.³⁰ The Spiritist vision of the afterlife has been one in which spirits, in death, are not divested of their tastes and personalities, determined in large part by their ethnicities and cultural milieus; the dead retain their personalities as means of self-identification and grounds for engagement with the living (Wirtz 2007). Both American Spiritualism and Caribbean-style Espiritismo were based on the cultivation of sympathies with denizens of a spirit world, parallel to ours. But the term 'sympathy' in early Spiritist circles referred not to the emotion aroused by the sharing of another's experience; it was understood as a predisposition to feeling and imagining another's desires (Cox 2003). Sympathy for the spirits, as attained through metonymic imitation of their postures and habits, has been deemed a prerequisite for them to 'pass' through, or possess, the body of a practitioner; only sympathetic gestures can compel the spirits to feel sympathy for their beseechers' plights and appear in their midst. Mimetic acts, like singing 'Jesus is Real to Me' for Big Momma—a personage presumed to

have recited that very hymn on many an occasion—have thus rendered the categories of ‘self’ and ‘Other’ malleable, engendering a ‘sensuous similarity’ between practitioner and spirit perceived to be the main condition of possibility for their alliance (Benjamin, quoted in Kelly 1998, 233).

According to the religious ideology of Afro-Cuban traditions, music serves as the most privileged conduit for the transmission of sympathy between singers and supernatural listeners.³¹ Music is the leavening agent that induces spirits to rise up from the earth, swelling the eyes and filling the bodies of the possessed. Yet objects also have a role to play in the materialization of spirits. For Spiritists the household altars called *bóvedas* are, in several respects, a miniature version of the *misa* table because a *bóveda* is simply a level surface draped in white cloth, set with glasses of water.³² In Spanish, *bóveda* usually refers to a sepulcher or burial vault, and as in the case of tombs arrayed with the favorite items of the deceased, *bóvedas* give practitioners a place to remember the spirits of the dead and piece together aspects of their pasts, in hopes of effecting their incarnation. It was not uncommon for members of *Ilé Laroye* to decorate their *bóvedas* with statues—such as Nilaja’s feathered Plains Indian—or with figures, such as dolls that would signify the spirit guides associated with them.³³ Only the body of the doll would be store bought; outfitting dolls with the right clothing and accessories was a practice analogous to that of assembling the *bóveda* itself, an exercise intended to deepen one’s acquaintance with a spirit. The labor involved in preparing the likeness of a Madama, warrior, or any other member of a *comisión* was regarded as materially transformative, a species of intimate contact capable of weaving connective tissue between practitioners and their spirit guides, turning images of the dead into indexical traces of their continued existence.

It was frequently the case in *Ilé Laroye* that spirit guides requested, through mediums, three-dimensional replicas of objects they had once used in their daily lives. A Cuban medium visiting Nilaja’s house for a series of *misas* told one participant that since one of her spirit guides carried a drum, she should put a small drum on her *bóveda*. The medium specified, ‘It’s not your drum—it’s his drum’. On one level, such directions operated according to the representational logic of Christian iconography, early modern oil painting, and Victorian studio photography, wherein appurtenances were viewed as attributes, metonymically encapsulating the essence of the subject (Erdogdu 2002; Poole 1997). Among the many other items requested through mediums during the course of my research were a frilly yellow fan, a horse, a hat, playing cards wrapped in cloth, an ashtray, and an alcoholic beverage. These objects stood for signal episodes in their mytho-biographies, and offered symbolic condensations of their personalities. Even devoutly Christian

spirits, frequently mentioned among the elevated ancestors of the assembled, were 'captured' in this manner. Protestant deacons and ministers were grandfathered—not to say dragooned—into the ritual complex of which misas were a part, not only through the singing of hymns, but also the presence of items connected with them on bóvedas. Someone was once told to honor a missionary in her family by keeping a tambourine such as those used in revival meetings on her bóveda; another participant was instructed to place a copy of the 'Good Book' there for an ancestor vibrantly envisioned as 'a Bible-thumper, pounding out the Word'.

Why would these spirits wish to return to the earth, to re-enter time and history? It could be argued that they did not. It is true that servants of the orishas, mpungus, and spirit guides understood the latter to be attracted to sweet song, strong liquor, and good tobacco, yet spirit guides were coaxed only with serious effort to human gatherings—at great economic cost and emotional expenditure—in order to mend relationships and bodies. They left sweat stains on the clothing of incorporated mounts, laboring to expose affliction as a product of tears in the social fabric that were both fresh and older than living memory; with mordant humor, spirits pointed out that some participants' lives were more hole than thread. Drawn to the raw edges, they peeled apart the layers of meaning commonly attached to distress in order to stitch together new understandings, 'bridging various semantic realms in a transformative way, thus bringing about a symbolic congruence between affective, sensory, corporeal, social, and cosmological fields' (Devisch 1993, 42). Indeed, the spirit guides resurfaced within the phenomenal world as much to critique its familiar social and political patterns as to savor its pleasures. Why else would those once at the bottom of society—Native Americans, Roma, slaves, migrants—bother to revisit the site of their individual and collective undoing? According to mediums, experience had given the spirits wisdom, and they wanted to make up for some bleak episodes in their checkered pasts by helping their sympathizers. The deeper the wounds recorded in their mytho-biographies, the more profound the healing they were thought to be able to effect (Matory 2007).

Perhaps the most richly characterized mytho-biography shared with me during my research was that of Billal Henderson's main guide. His story offers an example of the way that spirit guides are enlisted as moral-ethical exemplars, as well as fellow travelers, in Ilé Laroye. A Lucumí priest, Billal had been told by different mediums both in Brazil and Puerto Rico that his *cuadro espiritual* consisted of twenty-one spirits, and that he eventually had to find some way of caring for them all in order to preserve his sanity. With the assistance of mediums, Billal had fully identified one, an old slave—'old' in the

sense of both 'elderly' and 'former'—named Levi. I started inquiring about Levi after I attended a *misa* at which Billal was instructed to wear something around his ankle for Levi. Billal later attributed his need to have things around both his legs and wrists to his influence, because Levi was envisioned as having shackles on his feet. Billal told me that Levi was closely associated with Babalú Ayé, perhaps because he was seen by mediums to be using crutches, as in the iconic image reproduced in countless chromolithographs and statues of Saint Lazarus whose image historically corresponds to him. Such fragments of information became clues not only to Levi's identity, but also Billal's. According to Billal, Levi had driven him to create things with his hands, such as leather bracelets, and to paint objects for the *orishas*, including the gourds that hold the ritual *sacra* of Eleguá, his patron *orisha*. Through Billal's devotion to Levi manacles metamorphosed into adornment, and the toil forced on slaves converted into boundless creativity.

In one dream Levi told Billal to string beads onto a cord and wear them around his waist. Cognizant of the fact that some African women—including Yorùbá girls—have traditionally worn beads in this manner, Billal told Levi in the dream, 'That's what women do'. Levi replied, 'Not when I tell you to do it'. Billal said that they went on in this vein for some time until the dream ended, with Levi repudiating Yorùbá precedent as the basis for action, and privileging the maintenance of a reciprocal relationship based in sympathy over ethnographic precedents such as those judged to be authoritative in Òyótúnjì-affiliated communities. When Billal later sought Nilaja's opinion on the matter, she advised him to do as Levi requested. In acceding to Levi's command, Billal simultaneously increased his reliance on Nilaja's leadership and his willingness to allow himself to be used as a conduit for the messages of the spirits. By expanding his definition of selfhood to allow for the reconstitution of Levi's agency through him, Billal acted in a manner analogous to mediums' passing of spirits in *misas*. He not only shared his body with Levi but also transgressed what he interpreted as gendered norms to do so, thus mobilizing tropes of wifely submission associated with service to the *orishas* to generate greater intimacy with his spirit guide. Billal ultimately chose to interpret Levi's instruction as a prophylactic measure although he was unaware of tying as a centuries-old idiom in Bantu-Kongo religion, both as a means of harnessing divine or healing energy in different parts of the body and of indicating devotion to venerated figures (Thornton 1998; Rey 2001).³⁴

How can such practices be understood as mediating history through communal memory in Ilé Laroye? After all, Nilaja advocated embracing benevolent ancestors of any race: "We have the right to claim anything in Africa, because we are that continent, [as well as] that white grandmother."³⁵ A fruitful

approach may be suggested by a comparison of Levi's persona with those of other 'slave' spirits in the Afro-Atlantic world. For instance, slave spirits appear in Brazilian Umbanda as well, but in this tradition unenlightened spirits—those yet to be illuminated, and systematically distanced from practitioners through prayer and cleansing—most often are those of Indians or old slaves called *Pretos Velhos*, associated with the mischievous orixás Exú and Ogum (Capone 2010). Slave spirits were also prominent in American Spiritualist circles during the nineteenth century. In the northern United States where Black Spiritualists were rare, slave spirits tended to communicate in dialect reminiscent of minstrelsy, harbored no ill-will toward their masters, and affirmed mediums' views of the afterlife as a leveling in hierarchical status effected without retribution. In New Orleans, however, Creoles Spiritualists, particularly during the period prior to Jim Crow, 'imagined the mighty brought low before the feet of the slave' (Cox 2003, 178). Their spirits—such as Toussaint Louverture and, in one case, a man who perished in a race riot—advocated integration and insisted on the need for racial justice in order for cosmic order to descend on the earth. In solidarity with their spirit guides, 'Creole Spiritualists envisioned a spiritual future in which all were "Miscengens", all were Creoles' (Cox 2003, 184).

In a radical departure from practitioners of Umbanda and in accordance with Creole Spiritualists, in Ilé Laroye history was turned on its head: Indian and African guides were viewed as having the most power and 'evolution' (Matory 2007; McPherson 2006, 31). Their *misas blancas* were in effect a replaying of the past with a flipped script, in which spirit guides with the greatest socio-cultural capital in life—such as Roman Catholic clergy—had to countenance subordination to the orishas, and once marginalized figures, now dead, called the shots. The past that necessitated a *comisión* of Black spirits to stand for alienated and otherwise absent ancestors was addressed not only in songs, but also in the messages conveyed to practitioners. In one exchange I recorded during a *misa*, an artisan was cautioned to get cash from clients rather than accept a trade for her wares. 'Those days are over', Nilaja said, adding '*We's free now*', intentionally mimicking the grammar and Southern accent attributed to plantation slaves in film and literature. Such reminders testified to what were perceived to be the ongoing effects of the transatlantic slave trade in the United States: everyday economic exploitation, major obstacles to educational and professional advancement, institutionalized symbolic violence, mechanisms of legal and social control that policed the ghetto's boundaries yet imperiled residents, and poor health from both preventable chronic conditions and infectious diseases that disproportionately affected minority communities. The spirits made the connections between antebellum slavery and

contemporary inequality, addressing these issues with special bluntness when counseling participants' children.³⁶

At such moments, misas seem to mount a stirring critique of the past from the perspective of the present, and erect a vision of deceased entities through whom the here-and-now is protested. The anthropological literature on trance performance has tended to valorize such ceremonies as media through which subalterns can articulate grievances and be heard (Lewis 1971; Obeyesekere 1977; Stoller 1984). There is no doubt that, in certain contexts, possession has proven to be a counterhegemonic discourse (Boddy 1994; Comaroff 1985). Yet as Barbara Placido (2001) points out, scholarship in this vein has ironically placed more emphasis on its transgressive formal aspects than on its substantive content, and how the possessed hold forth rather than what they say. Noting that spirits often voice sentiments through oracular speech in favor of local hierarchical structures, more recent analyses of spirit mediumship have taken pains to underscore its polysemous nature and protean meanings for practitioners (Capone 2010; Johnson 2011; Masquelier 2001; McIntosh 2009). In order to fathom the depth of spirit guides' importance in Lucumí houses such as Ilé Laroye, we must relinquish any investment in situating religious subjects solely according to their complicity in or opposition to their own domination, and move beyond what Saba Mahmood calls 'the dualistic logic of resistance and constraint' (2005, 27 n.5). This allows us to comprehend misas' effects on the internal dynamics of the communities performing them, and the ways that they have equipped practitioners to inhabit moral-ethical norms, whether or not they have also supplied durable resources for cultural and sociopolitical opposition.

I would argue that members of Lucumí and Palo Monte communities continue to perform misas partly because they assist in sedimenting the correlation between authority, epistemological mastery, and experience. Judy Rosenthal writes in her ethnography of Ewe Vodun, 'Possession ceremonies and other Vodun rituals are precisely paths for *becoming* Foreign Others—for turning into what one (and one's group) is most radically not—and . . . this radical becoming, or overcoming of difference, is ecstatic, practiced because of its marvelous nature' (1998, 30). Far from a loss of corporeal and cognitive control, possession is interpreted in Afro-Diasporic religions as an index of moral-ethical power. Only initiated or senior ritual specialists are seen to be endowed with the sensori-motor aptitude and license to incorporate 'foreign others'. Possession itself is thought to engender knowledge—'a knowing how, a knowing who, and a knowing as'—less for personal self-discovery than for communal healing (Lambek 1993, 228). In Ilé Laroye, elders in Lucumí and Palo achieve this knowledge in misas. Their displays of sagacity elicit deference, and

their efforts to serve the spirits virtuously inspire junior participants to sympathize with them, as well as to cultivate sympathy for geographically and temporally distant supernatural beings. The practitioners' learning process continues with the assembly of bóvedas in their homes; by maintaining these altars they become increasingly accustomed to the conversion of their domiciles into houses of worship, facilitating the introduction of the mpungu/nfumbi's and orishas' ritual sacra into them. Spiritist practice thus naturalizes the establishment of interior cognitive-emotional spaces and physical, residential spaces as parallel fields for the cultivation of virtue.

These spaces intersect in practitioners' bodies. Perhaps because they were among the only objects former slaves and persons of African descent owned outright during the colonial period, bodies have been the primary media offered by Afro-Cuban religions for the ritual remedy of interpersonal problems. The embodied, synesthetic practices of Lucumí, Palo, and Espiritismo accentuate the materiality of social relations, and demand that spirits serve communities if they are to be served. The 'passing' of spirit guides turns practitioners into living bóvedas for the benefit of those patronized by them, rendering the dead corporeal for the healing of individual and corporate bodies. Sometimes this 'medicine' has not proven strong enough to redress affliction; incapacitating infirmity has long been interpreted as a call from the orishas to worship them, and physical illness continues to be the reason most frequently cited by initiates for Lucumí ordination (Pérez 2010). As Loring M. Danforth writes of the Greek Anastenarides, or 'fire dancers', 'The possessed are powerless, isolated, and ill; the spirit represents power, the community, and health. By entering into a positive relationship with the spirit, the possessed are able to become the people they are not' (1989, 62-63). The self to be discovered through relationships with the spirits is a healed healer, one competent in mediating between the past and present, as well as the human and divine, in order to preserve the life of the group. 'The possessed' are driven to reconfigure their conceptions of personhood and suffering, their own as well as others'.

Without fail, Billal referred to his spirit guide in the present tense as if he and Levi inhabited the same temporal dimension, with both of their stories stretching from the colonial period into the twenty-first century. The question of Levi's significance for Ilé Laroye remains unanswered. It seems evident that Levi is 'fictional but not simply fictitious' (Lambek 1996, 238), nor is he solely the imaginative externalization of Billal's intentions, themselves the artifacts of internalized discourses and representations. It could be said that Levi and other spirits act as what Pierre Nora (1989) has called *lieux de mémoire*, or 'memory sites', since remembering entails a communal effort through which recollections of events are composed, collated, and redacted

(Rolph-Trouillot 1992). In keeping with the deterritorialized traditions of Lucumí, Palo, and Espiritismo, it follows that its *lieux de mémoire* would not be fixed places, texts, or objects, but embodied and provisionally enunciated mytho-biographies. I therefore propose that Levi's emergence occasioned a form of memory-work that narrativized the equally unthinkable excess and paucity of the past: there is always more to it than is historiographically verifiable, and substantially less, so that an empirically verifiable organization of historical data cannot be compiled (Fabian 2007; Castelli 2004). In making a place for spirits like Levi, misas have allowed dreams such as Billal's to furnish archival materials for the telling of new stories, and for images collectively envisioned to count as evidence—impermissible in courts of law, as well as that of majority opinion—for the construction of relationships, not only with spirits but also with the past itself.

The importance of spirit guides in houses of Lucumí and Palo may be more fully apprehended with reference to the aforementioned notion of virtue. For my interlocutors, virtue was acquired in varying degrees of submission to all of one's supernatural patrons—orishas, mpungus, and spirit guides—and evinced in sustained and skillful ceremonial labor (Mahmood 2005). The mediums described discrete virtues, such as humility, patience, and integrity, in terms that recalled those capacities for ethical action called 'moral potentialities' by Talal Asad (2003, 92). Inculcated by corporeal training, the qualities prized in Afro-Diasporic religious communities have expressed communal values, including respect for elders, and a conception of the self as 'dividual', or multiple rather than unitary (Marriott 1976). In the archaic sense, virtue means 'power', yet to the extent that my interlocutors described the imperative to fulfill the spirits' desires as a problem of agency, they framed it as an issue of cultivating the virtue to put their own 'agency in abeyance' (Miyazaki 2004, 106).³⁷ Mediums such as Billal dramatized the elders' understanding that one is comprised of many selves, some in accord, others in contention; by incorporating their spirits they modeled what they deemed to be the proper coordination of these selves in distinct contexts. It was by watching these mediums as well as esteemed Lucumí and Palo initiates that newcomers to misas became aware of ritual competence as the ability to distinguish and contain the energies associated with different registers of religious subjectivity. By manifesting within the community, Levi and other guides demonstrated the result of virtuous subordination to their will: an intimate relationship, counsel, and healing presence.

The impulse to contact the dead has not been limited to those in search of religious guidance. Scholars no less than ritual specialists have attempted to conjure the past in order to fix the present, and frame proper communication

with 'foreign others' as a moral-ethical enterprise. Academic historians have routinely turned to the deceased as a source of inspiration, casting their duties not as interpretive but as recuperative, part of a mission to resuscitate pasts that haunt them with lingering doubts and unfinished business. The historian's claim of enjoying an intimate rapport with ghosts is not merely a rhetorical flourish; this conceit authorizes his assertion to be able to resurrect the past through his particular, and invariably partial, version of events (Toews 1998). For instance, Steven Greenblatt writes,

It was true that I could hear only my own voice, but my own voice was the voice of the dead, for the dead had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves, and those traces make themselves heard in the voices of the living. Many of the traces have little resonance, though every one, even the most trivial or tedious, contains some fragment of lost life; others seem uncannily full of the will to be heard. (1988, 1)

According to Jürgen Pieters, Greenblatt is only one of many authors writing in the historiographical tradition to employ 'this rich topos' since the early Renaissance, as a rhetorical tool and poetic device (2005, 18). It may be that that this topos reached its apotheosis in the sphere of religious practice with the table-turnings of Spiritualism, and in critical theory with the ruminations of Walter Benjamin. In retrospect, one can see this topos stretching across the centuries, thinning at times yet never completely losing its elasticity—its ability to capture the character of the relationship believed to obtain, at any given time in the modern era, between the contemporary and the historical.

In the foregoing I endeavored to demonstrate the historiographical character of my interlocutors' religious practice as they critically examined the available sources of information concerning their familial pasts—tracing genealogies, amassing artifacts, soliciting oral histories—and synthesized the fragments into narratives expansive enough to contain their historical experience. Of course, the methods that practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions have used to access the voices of the departed have depended for their efficacy on a regime of embodied practices and model of agency not normally associated with the historian's craft. Misa ushered Black North Americans into a moral-ethical order that held the living accountable to the dead and temporarily achieved a 'retroactive realignment of the past' in accordance with authoritative religious norms (Danto 1965, 168). While participants addressed the incontrovertible fact of their cultural and ethnic diversity through the evocation of such disparate characters as 'gypsies' and Madamas, they nevertheless condemned the history of oppression that had scattered the branches of African-American family trees, and let many wither into twigs. By invoking

'their' guides with racially marked singing and other mimetic behavior, practitioners not only added Black North Americans to the list of Diasporic *volks* recognized as a discrete category of spirits; they found a means of making themselves at home within Lucumí and Palo Monte at the cusp of the twenty-first century. Whatever the future holds for their memory work, it has succeeded in converting Afro-Cuban religious practice from pirate treasure into birthright, a legacy bequeathed by the disinherited.

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Notes

1. February 28, 2004. Most subsequent ethnographic references to Ilé Laroye are based on four years of IRB-approved fieldwork, 2005-2009 (Perez 2010). I have changed the name of this community and all my interlocutors for reasons of confidentiality.

2. The man who changed his name to that of a previous incarnation could not have envisioned the significance his rituals would come to have for devotees of Santería, particularly in conjunction with spirit possession.

3. 'Scientific' Spiritists have always eschewed ceremonial practices, but it would seem that they are in the minority.

4. Communities such as that of Mormons envisioned the afterlife as an eventful time, when souls would enjoy the opportunity to engage in forms of endeavor analogous to those they had pursued in their mundane existences.

5. This might be interpreted as an attempt to differentiate herself from her elders and redefine her religious persona as an expression of her political consciousness.

6. 1978, 28-29.

7. Initially motivated by the desire to practice an African-derived religion, many U.S.-born African-Americans of Nilaja's generation, coming of age in the 1970s and 1980s, entered houses of orisha worship run by immigrant Latinos and Puerto Ricans and were thus exposed to Kardecist Spiritist rituals.

8. Passing, or incorporating the spirits, was described by the mediums as a cleansing in itself.

9. Personal communication, September 22, 2006.

10. After one *misa* I noted that Santi almost passed a spirit a couple of times; he seemed to start doing so when we sang "*con siete días, con siete noches*", lyrics in a song that mentions Babalú Ayé—his father in *ocha*'. June 19, 2005.

11. The uniformity of this part of the ritual was brought home to me one night when the *Collection of Selected Prayers* was nowhere to be found and Arlene was forced to recite as much as she could from memory, which was a great deal.

12. It was not uncommon for participants to pray a round of Our Fathers and Hail Marys after this song.

13. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that when they were originally composed and sung in the Caribbean the movement described also called to mind the Middle Passage.

14. These early songs tended to be sung in a 4/4 rhythm, although they were slowed down or sped up occasionally. For a sense of the complexity of the rhythmic and melodic aspects of singing for *muertos* in the context of *cajón*, see Warden 2006.

15. The first set of lyrics are transcribed by Garoutte and Wambaugh (2007, 171) as beginning, '¡Ah!, *Güiri, güiri, güiri ngó!*'; 'Ah! *Güiri, güiri, ngó!*'; they translate these lines as 'Ah! Listen, listen, listen, *ngó!* Ah! Listen, listen, *ngó!*'. Garoutte and Wambaugh (2007, 224m.25) write, "The Congo-Cuban word *ngó* means "government, command, leadership" ... Varona Puente has advised us that, in the context of this song, the word refers to the "micro-government of Palo" " *Kimbini waa waa waal kimbini waal me kobayende* appears to be an anglicized pronunciation of the song transcribed by Nolan Warden as 'Chichirigüa güa güa/Chichirigüa mi Coballende'. Kobayende, or Coballende, is the Palo version of Babalú Ayé, in his Kongo aspect. Cabrera transcribes similar lines, 'Yimbiri Gwákwa/Yimbirigüa Coballende' (1983 [1954], 463). I have not been able to find an adequate or persuasive translation for the lyrics of this song, and my interlocutors did not provide any for this song specifically.

16. The rite of passage into Palo Monte involves the placement of patterned scratches or cuts on the torso, shoulders, and wrists, while Lucumí initiation ‘enthrones’ the gods in the crown of a practitioner’s head, which has been ritually incised.

17. As J. Lorand Matory writes, ‘The Congo spirits are usually imagined or depicted as petroleum-black slaves—whether as raggedly dressed and muscular field hands or as elderly, white-clad and whitehaired house servants’ (2007, 407).

18. Lucumí praise-song lyrics are also exceedingly difficult to translate not only because the atonality of Lucumí renders Yorùbá analogues impossible to determine, but also because meaning is to be derived from the context in which the song is sung (Menocal 1994).

19. This word, meaning ‘prayer’ in Spanish, may seem to have the same etymological root as ‘plagiarism’, but the latter stems from the Latin term *plagiarius*, referring to someone in ancient Rome who either kidnapped someone else’s slave or child, or abducted and enslaved a citizen, either freeborn or previously emancipated. Plegaria, on the other hand, derives from the Latin *precarius*; Szafraniec writes, ‘Prayer, as the etymology of the word tells us (the word evolved from Middle French *preiere*, from Medieval Latin *precaria*, from Latin, feminine of *precarius*—“obtained by entreaty”), is a precarious address, a leap into uncertainty’ (2005, 223).

20. I thank the first anonymous reader of this article for suggesting this formulation.

21. Among those heard over the course of my research at least once were ‘Why Should I Feel Lonely, When Jesus is My Portion?’, ‘His Eye is on the Sparrow’, ‘Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow’, ‘Sweet Jesus, Lily of the Valley’, ‘Steal Away to Jesus’, ‘Tis the Old Ship of Zion’, ‘Jesus, Light of the World’, ‘Oh Mary, Don’t You Weep’, ‘Holy Ghost Fire (Shut Up in My Bones)’, ‘God Has Smiled on Me’, and ‘Encourage My Soul’.

22. Such toasts were made according to tradition within the house.

23. Personal communication, April 15, 2005.

24. I am grateful to the second anonymous reviewer of this article for requesting clarification on this point.

25. My interpretation of these lyrics is based not only on how the song was performed, but also on private conversations with elders in which they appeared to draw on the lyrics to describe aspects of their experience.

26. Although according to the elders of Ilé Laroye everyone has spirits to guide them, not everyone is meant to ‘work with’ them, or contact them for the purpose of developing mediumistic faculties; initiates are sometimes forbidden from attending misas and practicing Spiritism in their itás.

27. Buffalo soldiers were African-American cavalrymen from the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments and the 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments. Among other duties, they were charged with displacing Native Americans from indigenous lands throughout the West after the Civil War. They fought not only in the Indian Wars, but also in the Spanish-American War, Philippine War, and Mexican Expedition. The irony of their presence within misas alongside the spirits of First Peoples requires lengthier consideration than I am able to give here. See Leonard (2010).

28. In Melanie Schuster’s *Until the End of Time*, one character recalls, ‘“My grandmother was a pistol, you hear me? Big Momma was known for three things: her temper, her velvety black skin and her absolute refusal to take any mess off anyone, black or white, male or female” Big Momma kicked butt and took names, even in rural Mississippi. Even after Big Poppa died, leaving her with a farm to run and children to raise, she stayed strong’ (2003, 21).

29. Similar operations were in evidence in the only other liturgical context in which I have heard the spirituals sung in Ilé Laroye: after the feeding of egún. During one such ceremony in 2005, participants sang 'This Little Light of Mine', and when the lyrics came to the verse 'God give it to me', the elder leading the chorus sang instead, 'Egún give it to me/ I'm gonna let it shine'.

30. Personal communication, October 8, 2005.

31. Both ancestors and orishas have been mobilized prior to a ceremony by an elder's invocation, or *moyuba*, through the *aché* produced by her breath, saliva, and the vibration of his or her vocal cords; these elements combine with melody and the pounding of drums in Lucumí drum feasts (*wemilere*) and Congo 'parties' to alert spirits to the needs of their worshippers and persuade them to appear.

32. Most practitioners are advised to put seven glasses on a bóveda unless the person is a child of Oyá, whose relationship to the dead and the number nine usually indicates the placement of nine glasses of water.

33. Although some dolls in Lucumí houses are ceremonially activated for the orishas so that they materially embody the spirits invested in them (as when someone's Oshún or Yemayá expresses a desire, through divination, for a doll to be placed alongside her ritual sacra), those made for bóvedas differ in two ways: first, they are understood as representations without agency of their own; second, they depict deceased persons rather than gods.

34. Not coincidentally, Levi's appeal involved Billal transgressing what he perceived to be gendered norms of behavior, a situation similar to new initiates' acceptance of the title *iyawo*, or 'wife', for the first year of initiation.

35. Personal communication, February 4, 2006. This statement was made long before Barack Obama's famous speech on race in Philadelphia in which he mentioned his white grandmother.

36. During one *misa* the mediums focused on Nilaja's middle-school-aged niece, Christine. Arlene told Christine that she knows Christine feels odd and alone, out of sync with the world, and sacrifices herself to fit in, 'but your difference is your saving grace—we're all a little odd—that is your blessing; you may never fit in, but you have a purpose. The "alone" feeling will dissipate. [She is] a sweet little girl who want to be tough and rough and hard and "gangsta". Go and talk to the egún, let them become a part of your life, tell them about the ugly boy trying to talk to you, how you feel you won't ever be solid on the inside. But your spirits will guide you'. May 19, 2007.

37. In Lucumí and Palo, as in other Afro-Atlantic religions, this capacity has been conceptualized precisely as the requirement for all other powers to be obtained.